

SOFIA PROKOFIEVA

# The Old Attic

RADUGA PUBLISHERS



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**The Old Attic**

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RADUGA PUBLISHERS  
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С. Прокофьева  
НА СТАРОМ ЧЕРДАКЕ  
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## Chapter I

### THE SMALL TRUNK

What a mess! It was now or never!

But somehow Sasha could not carry out his plan at home. He just couldn't, and that was that. He did not even know why.

So now here he was in the dark entrance to Katya's apartment building, probably the oldest one in their town, that is, after the church on the other side of the river, opposite the stadium.

Sasha tried to use the high dusty window-sill where a fly, caught in a cobweb, was shuddering and droning drearily.

But people kept walking aimlessly up and down Katya's old staircase, and two old ladies had already eyed Sasha suspiciously, exchanged knowing glances and shaken their heads.

No, this place wouldn't do. Sasha was afraid that as soon as he opened his satchel, someone would poke his long nose over his shoulder and say, "What are you up to here, boy?"

Sasha started going up the steps, but behind all the doors there were people laughing, chatting, and making a noise.

Without thinking, he started tiptoeing cautiously past a door which had a small sign on it saying: "Dr. Petrova. Dentist. Teeth treated and removed painlessly".

An unpleasant chill ran up his spine.

From the other side of the door, which was thickly padded and lined

with black oilcloth, Sasha could hear the horrible whine of a drill and someone groaning.

"And it won't hurt a bit," screeched Dr. Petrova.

No amount of padding could stifle her voice.

Sasha climbed right to the top of the stairs where there was just one door, criss-crossed with rough, gnarled planks. He pulled one off, which was held in place by a rusty nail, and slipped sideways into the attic.

It was dark inside. The only light was coming from a semi-circular skylight which looked like a cat's eye.

There was some kind of rubbish strewn about everywhere you looked. Because of the dust and cobwebs everything seemed fluffy and jagged-edged.

The handle-bars of a bicycle with only one wheel were wrapped round a broken chair. A tarnished mirror had been leant against it.

There was something gleaming dimly right under the planks. Something round and metallic. Sasha strained to see what it was but he couldn't tell whether it was a samovar or a knight's helmet.

He warily stretched his hands out into the darkness and fingered the dusty planks. Cobwebs tore soundlessly apart as he touched them. Something tiny with lots of legs on it ran straight across Sasha's hand and up his sleeve. He shook his hand violently.

Yes... This was no ordinary attic! But no' wonder! In Katya's house even the attic was bound to be different. It wouldn't be a bad idea to have a rummage round. Only not now. He had no time for that now.

He sat down on a box by the window, or, rather, on some kind of rickety old trunk and it let out a piercing whine and sunk under him just like it was alive.

With a sigh or, rather, a moan Sasha pulled his daily report book out of his satchel and opened it.

His heart throbbed sadly.

There it was, the blasted thing. A "C". Bless its miserable little heart. Fancy, just one little squiggle but enough to ruin your whole life.

And, you know, everything had gone so wonderfully up to now. Only

Friday and Saturday were left before his birthday. All he had to do was get through them somehow, and, say, make the time pass quicker by sleeping a bit longer, and that was it.

On Sunday his dad had promised to take all of 5A, Sasha's class, on the motor launch he was captain of.

And Sasha had already imagined millions of times standing on the launch's bow with Katya. The ice had only melted very recently, and it might very well rain or even snow.

He would wait until Katya got really cold and started shivering, and her famous fringe got sopping wet, and then he would take off scarf, hat and coat and give them all to her. And then she would gaze at him with her light, grown-up eyes.

Maybe, he'd even get an opportunity to save her life. If his luck was in, she might fall overboard, say! Boris, of course, would start shouting out some brilliant plan or other. But not Sasha! No, he'd dive straight in after her and rescue her. And when they were dragged out, he would casually say: "It was nothing really. So I dived in, and I rescued her — what's so extraordinary about that?"

But now it had all gone down the drain, and all because his dad was such a crackpot when it came to maths.

No, it wasn't for nothing Monday meant to be the unluckiest day of the week. That's just when they had their maths test. And here was the result — a "C"!

Sasha miserably gulped back his saliva, resolutely got his rubber out of his pencil-case, rubbed its dirty corner against his trouser-leg, held his breath deep down, and began carefully rubbing out the mark.

How careful he had to be! The paper was so delicate.

He wriggled to make himself more comfortable on the trunk and suddenly there was a crunch and a cracking sound underneath him and he went plunging into the trunk and ended up with his knees way over his head. A sharp piece of wood was prodding him in the side, and there was still a nail sticking up to the left which had pierced right through his trousers and slightly into his leg.

He glanced at his report book and gasped loudly: there was now a hole

where the "C" had been!

He fought and kicked furiously and ineffectively, trying to pull himself out of the trunk.

Served him right! He couldn't even show his dad the report book now. Even a fool would guess everything straightaway by this hole.

Eventually he managed to struggle to his feet, and in a fit of temper gave the truck an almighty kick, shattering the dry planks with a loud crackle, and sending them flying in all directions.

And then he saw them...

There was a pile of amazing-looking books lying on the very bottom of the trunk.

And they obviously weren't ordinary books either — Sasha realised that at once. You probably wouldn't find anything like them in a library but only in a museum, perhaps.

They were old, even very old books with clasps made of copper or perhaps even gold. And how thick they were! Why, one book was as big as Sasha's satchel.

With both hands he hardly managed to lift the top book. My, it was heavy! And look at the dust on it...

He spat on the cover and rubbed it with his sleeve.

The gleaming, golden letters on its dark old leather said: *The Complete Encyclopedia of Magic*. And then below there were slightly smaller shiny golden letters which said: "In six volumes. Volume I."

Somehow these words did not strike home at once and then suddenly — bang! — he felt the full impact of them, and his mind boggled. He clutched feverishly onto the book as though it might tear itself free and run, or fly off like a bird.

Ever so quietly and carefully, with bated breath, Sasha opened the book and at once the beautiful, heavy letters, all loops and swirls, began dancing about before his eyes.

"Ord-in-ary sourc-er-ess," Sasha read syllable by syllable. There was a hollow rattle inside his head. "Gosh! A witch! And in brackets it also said: "With and without broomstick". "Good magicians", "Bad magicians", "Lies and liars". And some sort of poetry or other."

Unable to believe his eyes, Sasha read on:





*Beasts will howl at the moon,  
At midnight the crow will caw!  
If someone believes the liar,  
All his lies will come true.  
Hocus-pocus,  
Dominocus,  
Spin-span,  
Muskidan.*

The words "hocus-pocus" somehow came as a bitter disappointment to Sasha because they seemed to spoil everything. They made the whole piece seem silly and lose its credibility. How could that be if it was all real magic?

Sasha read on:

“Note I. Oh, liar! Your lies will come true only if someone believes you. If not, they will simply remain lies.

“Note II. Oh, unfortunate one! If, stooping under the weight of your lies, you wish everything to be the same as it was, then...”

What came next was impossible to make out. The bottom of the page was covered with blotches and holes, as if mice had been nibbling away at it. What's more, one of the magicians must have been reading it at the dinner table and been turning the pages with greasy fingers.

Sasha read with difficulty:

*My witness is the starry Leo!  
The light of Sagittarius and Aquarius!  
Break the seal of magic!  
Only b ... no ... sp ... yo ... li...  
And b .... ge ... th ... be ... o ... you...  
Ma ... yo ... st ... a ... ov ... aga...*

No, you couldn't possibly work it out, especially not the last lines.

But Sasha didn't even attempt to guess what was written. A starry Leo! Huh, what nonsense!

But that wasn't the main thing! It was the magic — could it really be true?

Panting, Sasha strode over to the window, leaned out and avidly gulped down the sharp, chilled air.

Looking down at the empty sunlit yard he saw a red umbrella crossing the street. On a balcony of the house opposite a woman in a warm headscarf and a light summer dress was beating an eiderdown with a stick. A sweet little sparrow settled on the eaves, and then a bloated pigeon flew up.

Everything looked just the same as always. No, there was no such thing as magic! There couldn't be. Their teacher, Anna Petrovna had explained that to them. How could there be?

Sasha looked back at the dark attic. Maybe there were no books and he had just imagined it all?

But no, the old books were still lying among the planks, their copper clasps gleaming just as grandly as before in the darkness.

"Well then... Does that mean they were written for no particular purpose, I mean, just for fun?"

No... So, maybe, there really was such a thing as witchcraft. Well, maybe not outside in the sunshine but perhaps here in this attic at night? Why not? Maybe, a magician once lived in this house. And then he died because magicians also die, you know, and his things got moved into the attic. Or perhaps he simply used to come here to work magic because he felt embarrassed to do so in front of the neighbours. Yes, this is how it must have been. So, if it was all true, then, then...

Well, anyway, he might as well read the words of the spell, for who knows...

In a rather hoarse voice, quite unlike his own, Sasha began reading:

*Beasts will howl at the moon,  
At midnight the crow will caw!  
If someone believes the liar,  
All his lies will come true.  
Hocus-pocus,  
Dominocus,  
Spin-span,  
Muskidan.*

Never before had Sasha tried so hard, not even when he had read a poem by heart at a school concert. Somehow his voice sounded very odd in the dark attic. The disturbed darkness stirred in the corners.

Sasha carefully closed the book, put it back with the others and piled some planks on top. It looked to him as though the planks underneath were glowing slightly red. No, it was just a ray of sunlight which had somehow managed to escape through the dusty window and shoot into the depths of the attic.

Sasha stuffed his report book back into his satchel with shaky hands, crawled clumsily through the gap and put the gnarled plank back in place.

## Chapter 2

### A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

Sasha walked slowly down the steps as his legs were feeling weak and wobbly.

On the second floor he came face to face with Lena, Katya's younger sister.

Usually he simply swiped first-formers like her clean out of his way.

He would advance on them like a tank, and they just had to run off, dodge out the way or get mowed down. He never even looked at them either because they all looked exactly the same.

But Lena was, you have to remember, Katya's sister and that's why Sasha glanced at her once and instantly felt terribly sorry for her.

She was very small, most likely the smallest in the class, and ever so puny, with a pointed nose and transparent eyes. Her two front teeth were missing, which made Sasha feel ever sorrier for her. She was always howling in the yard over some trifle or other. Katya never took any notice of her. She would not even turn her head, as if she had not heard. But somehow Sasha always felt rather sad when he saw her crying.

Of course, he was embarrassed to comfort her when Katya was around but sometimes he even thought it would not be a bad idea if he were to get himself a little sister just like her.

"You're all dirty," Lena said shyly.

Sasha brushed his sides down and dust flew in all directions but he just absent-mindedly watched it dissolving in the air.

"I'll try it on Lena..." he suddenly decided. "She'll do... She'll believe anything. After all, the main thing is to be believed..."

"Lena," he said. It was hard speaking, just as though his tongue had swollen up. "I got an 'A' in maths today. Yes, an 'A'."

He stared intently at Lena's face. He wanted to knock the word into her head.

"An 'A'," he repeated.

Lena made way for him to pass. A look of fear flashed across her face.

Why was he speaking to her like this, she wondered. Maybe when he'd finished, he was going to biff her...

"Golly..." she said quietly and pressed her back against the dark wall. "And I got a 'B' for writing..."

Sasha dived past her down the stairs.

"She believed me, she believed me!" he kept repeating to himself as he skipped downstairs. "That's Lena for you. So, that's that. Now I've got an 'A' in my report book, I'm sure I have!"

His satchel immediately seemed heavier. He thought he could see this huge golden "A" which took up the whole satchel. The satchel's handle was burning his fingers!

He shot into the yard. It was sunny and quiet. A bee went droning sweetly and sleepily past his ear.

He dived into the bushes, snapping branches and forced his way right to the fence. A mangy grey cat streaked out from under the bushes, hissing and holding something between its teeth, and Sasha got such a shock, he nearly dropped his satchel.

The leafless branches did not offer him much protection. Of course, he could be seen from the street and the yard. But without bothering to look for a more concealed spot, he dropped down onto his knees and unfastened his satchel with trembling fingers and pulled out his report book. His fingers now felt like thick rubber sausages. So impatient he was that his mouth became parched as if he had been eating blotting paper.

It was unbearable how slowly the report book's pages were turning. One week. Another week. And another! At last!

He let go of the book wearily. There was absolutely no sign of any "A". Just as before there was a jagged triangular hole gaping in the report book. Disappointment and the bright sunlight caused tears to well into his eyes and his nose to start running. Bother!.. Why had he believed it! Hocus-pocus! Now, Boris was bright, he would never have believed such a thing... If Katya found out, she wouldn't half laugh!

Please be so kind as to meet Magician Sasha Cookooshkin from 5A!  
The whole class would fall about laughing.

## Chapter 3

### An "A" FOR MATHS

There was nobody at home. Sasha went into the kitchen, and poked the stiff macaroni in the frying pan. He did not feel a bit like food.

So he lay down on the sofa with his boots on.

How could he talk his dad round? Of course, if he were to get his mother involved... But his dad could say such hurtful things... Why, anything would be better than to hear him say them.

He turned his head and sadly pushed it into the pillow.

The telephone rang in his parents' room. He hardly managed to drag himself off the sofa. He seemed to be slithering in all directions like dough.

"Sasha?" asked a familiar, rather stern voice.

"Yes, Anna Petrovna," said Sasha in a deathly tone. What else did she want? She'd given him a "C"—surely that was enough!..

"Are your parents at home?" she asked.

"So, she wants to complain about me," he thought in horror.

Seething with hatred, he imagined her pale round face. Now, when he got an "A", she somehow always seemed to have the kindest and most wonderful face in the whole wide world.

"There's nobody in. They're out," he replied.

"When can I speak to them, then?"

"I don't know. Dad ... has got trouble at work..." he lied. "And mum too... No, I mean, something nice has happened... A visitor ... yes, her brother's come to stay! She hasn't seen him for ten years. No ... twenty. So, you see, she's simply rushed off her feet... I don't know when they'll be back."

"That's a pity," replied Anna Petrovna.

"Pity, my foot!" thought Sasha, furious.

"I wanted to tell your father how well you've done. He's recently been worried about your maths. Oh well, then, you can tell him yourself about the "A" you got today."

"The 'A'?" spluttered Sasha and sank to the floor.

The receiver slipped out of his hands like a fish and started spinning

round on its twisted cord directly in front of his nose.

Anna Petrovna exclaimed his name a couple of times and then rang off.

So... That proved it, then! And if it weren't for the hole, there would be an "A" and not a "C". And it meant there really was such a thing as magic! There was! But if that was so, then...

A key rattled in the lock. The door clicked and creaked open.

"I'm simply rushed off my feet... I'm in such a hurry..." Sasha's mother said in the hallway in a cheerful voice.

She came into the room and then Sasha's father dragged two bulging bags in after her.

"Off the floor!" said his father who liked giving orders. He never said, "Get off the floor!", always simply "Off the floor!"

Sasha got up and immediately flopped limply onto the sofa.

"Sasha, darling, have you seen the telegram?" asked his mother.

She picked a sheet of paper off the table and tossed it to him and it landed right in his hands. He unfolded it and read: "Arriving fifth. Love to Masha, Victor and Sasha. Best wishes. Simon."

"I'm simply longing to see Simon..." she said happily. "He's a close relative of mine, after all. Just imagine — we haven't seen each other for ten, no, nearly twenty years. Poor thing — he's such a rolling stone — why, he's been all round the world. At last we're going to meet up again... How marvellous... I'll probably need a week to talk everything over with him..."

Sasha stared at his mother, flabbergasted. She was joking, surely? Who exactly did she mean? After all she had always said she was her darling mother's only daughter.

Anyway, the magic could not possibly or certainly ought not work on his mother. There'd been some sort of silly slip. Well, it was all right as far as his teacher, school and marks went — more or less —but his mother? Sasha felt there was something unpleasant about all this. Maybe, he was a cousin?

"I wonder how long he'll stay for," said Sasha's father. "We'll take him along on Sunday, won't we, Sasha?"

"You'd better keep your eyes on the children," said his mother. "When people come on excursions to our dam, we're always worried sick the



children might fall over the edge, they're so naughty."

"Oh, we'll cope," replied Sasha's father with a laugh.

"So what if they do," thought Sasha.

He loved both his mother and his father very much — maybe, his mother a fraction more, but just now they both seemed rather unreal and blurred, as though he was looking at them through a mist.

"And just think, it's my day off today," said Sasha's mother, laughing happily, and taking bunches of bananas, bottles and tins out of her shopping bag. "Don't go to work either, Victor. Ask for the day off, just for once. And Simon, the nincompoop, forgot to say what time his train was."

"I don't know about that," said his father in a strange voice. He curled his fingers round his nose, and started absent-mindedly pulling it this way and that. "How do you reckon they'll cope without me? Loading up?"

"Why are you being so quiet, Sasha?" his mother suddenly asked and looked at him.

Sasha felt two hot rays piercing him. He wanted to say something, if only one word but only a suppressed hoarse sound came from his lips.

"Sasha, what's happened?" his mother asked in a faint voice, sinking onto a chair.

Unlike his father, his mother never shouted. She never unbuckled her belt, breathing heavily and glowering. But somehow she managed to see right through Sasha, as though he was as transparent as glass.

She used to guess about everything, much to Sasha's anger and dismay. And then he got it! She could fly into a temper over all sorts of petty things which any normal person would simply turn a blind eye at. She could even hurt Sasha by bursting into tears. Real tears. She would get out a handkerchief and start sobbing and wiping away her tears, although she knew perfectly well this was sheer agony for him.

Sasha was a live human being, and, you know, anything could happen to a live human being — even low marks, for goodness sake. So, why, why, speak to his mother about low marks at all? It would only upset her.

Low marks should be kept great secrets, known only to the giver and receiver. There are worse things in life, after all...

"Mummy..." Sasha began remorsefully. "Only don't be very..."

"The ice-cream!" his mother suddenly shrieked, and seized two dripping

white packets out of the bag and dashed off to the fridge in the kitchen with them, leaving a trail of large white blobs behind her.

"I've got away with it," thought Sasha, relieved.

"Well," said his father sternly, folding his arms behind his back. "I'm waiting. Is it something at school again?"

Well, it was much easier with his father.

"Oh, why's mother doing it again... She always does..." Sasha muttered. "I got an 'A' for maths today. Anna Petrovna even rang you. Only you weren't in."

"An 'A,'" beamed his father. "That's the boy. Well done, lad. Masha!" he shouted into the kitchen. "Hear that? Sasha's got an 'A' for maths."

"May I go out for a walk?" called Sasha. He didn't go into the kitchen, just in case. It was better to keep out of his mother's sight.

"Why not. The weather's fine," said his father.

"Not for too long, though," agreed his mother.

## Chapter 4

### LIES ALSO REQUIRE CAREFUL THOUGHT

Sasha walked about the yard outside in a daze. He could quite easily have knocked into a bench or a fence or fallen down a hole. And if there had suddenly been a thunder clap, he would not have heard it.

All sorts of random ideas kept flashing through his head.

"The first thing is to get a car. A Volga or, if the worse comes to the worse, a Moskvich..." thought Sasha. "No, it probably wouldn't work. First of all, because nobody will believe it's mine, and if they do, some nosy parker or other is bound to ask where I got it from. And then there's the money. I need a lot. A whole sack of it. I'll say I've found buried treasure. Nobody'll be able to find me out then. Then I'll buy my own chocolate and ice-cream — tons of the stuff. And when it's mum's birthday, I'll find out what she wants and lie. I'll lie to dad about something too. Something nice..."

Just then Sasha tripped over something and came back to reality. He sighed deeply.

Of course, it would be better to tell his mother all about it and then they would all go on lying together. That would be just wonderful. But his mother could not be trusted as an ally. She would, of course, get angry and plead with him not to lie. She would hand the magic encyclopedias into the district library, and that would be the end of it.

Sasha started splashing through the puddles again.

There was some hitch to all this, something much less pleasant and simple as he would have liked. Most likely, it was because he now had a secret, and from now on he would have to hide from his mother not just trivial accidents like broken windows or scraped elbows but something that would soon become the most important thing in his life — Magic.

And that's why it seemed as if his parents were rather superfluous in his life, even a hindrance.

"So what if it's just a pack of lies. Why, there's all sorts of lies too. So I'm only going to make up good lies..." he reassured himself. "I'm going to be a good magician..." Of course, he could have lied about Boris becoming an imbecile. He could for all Sasha cared, but he didn't. Instead, he would lie to someone that Katya had promised to kiss him. He would go up to her when she was all alone and say casually, "If I'm not mistaken, you made me a promise?" Katya wouldn't be able to wriggle out of that! Or maybe he would lie that Katya was in love with him. Why not?

He burst out giggling at the thought, and immediately felt a blow on his ear.

Standing in front of him was Greg. Although only about two years older than Sasha, Greg was known by everyone for many blocks around.

The most incredible rumours were spread about him shaving, and smoking, and his best friend being in prison for robbing a fizzy lemonade kiosk. There was always a blank space of an arm's length around him because he was liable to thump anyone.

For some reason or other there was no sign of Greg's mother and father. They had probably escaped as soon as he was born.



Greg lived with his aunt — the dentist, Dr. Petrova, whom everyone in the yard was scared of. And he shared his aunt's unpleasant and infamous reputation. Anyone in the neighbourhood who needed to see a dentist always ended up going to Greg's aunt as she saw clients both at the clinic and at home. Greg grew up alongside her high-pitched, whining drill, and that most likely explains why he turned out the way he was. He treated everything around with a mixture of contempt, distaste and disgust.

Sasha bent down and covered his face with his hands but he was not quick enough to avoid getting punched straight in the teeth.

"What's wrong? I haven't done anything to you, have I?" Sasha asked, as the underdog usually does in a fight.

Greg turned and sauntered lazily towards his house. You could tell even from his back that he despised everything on earth.

Sasha licked his lip and then touched it with his fingers. It was steadily puffing up, as if there was an active volcano underneath but he instantly forgot all about it. He went out of the yard and his feet took him along the familiar route to Katya's yard.

He first caught sight of them over the fence. There they were — Katya and Boris — sitting together on a bench whose paint had started peeling off over the winter.

"What use are they, these benches?" Sasha suddenly thought angrily. "I'd have them all taken to a rubbish tip out of town and burnt."

Katya and Boris were sitting at either end of the bench with a big gap between them, but their satchels were leaning against each other on a dry spot of ground in front of them.

For some reason Sasha found this horrible, and as he came up, he kicked Boris's satchel aside.

"Hey, you, steady on..." said Boris, cocking his head on one side as usual: that was probably his brain weighing it down.

"What's the matter with your lip?" asked Katya.

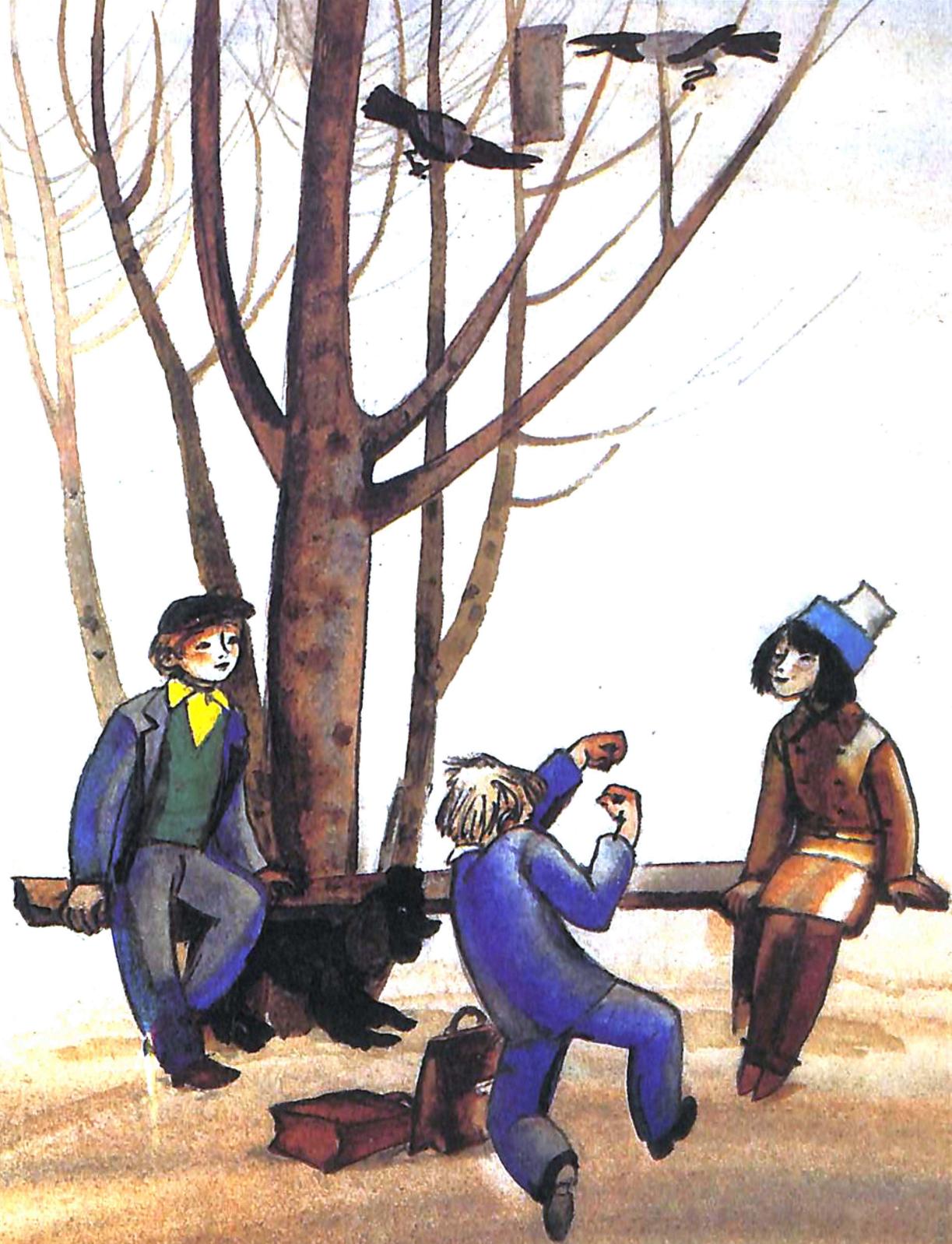
Katya's shiny black fringe nearly covered her eyes, and she used to pout her lower lip slightly and blow it neatly off her face.

"I picked a fight with Greg," Sasha replied in a matter-of-fact manner and spat.

Katya smirked and looked at Sasha with her light, grown-up eyes. Then she stared long and hard at his cut lip, as though that was the only interesting thing about him to look at.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shouted Sasha, in no mood for a joke. "If you'd seen what I did to him! Why, I made mincemeat of him! He whacked me like this! And then I thumped him like this! And like that! And then bop on the nose!"

Sasha hopped up and down and slashed the air with his fists. The look of scorn in Katya's eyes vanished and she now looked at him attentively and even with interest.



"Yes, do tell me you two why he's such a bully? He won't let anyone go pass. Why, yesterday he pushed Lena into a puddle."

"Well, he won't ever again," promised Sasha.

"You're not fibbing, are you?" asked Katya.

"Why on earth should I? Ask his aunt if you don't believe me. She saw everything from her window and then came dashing out without even her coat on, and flew straight towards me. So off I ran with her hot on my heels. Why, she looked as though she was going to tear me to shreds."

"Yes, that's her, all right," said Katya, convinced.

"Wretch!" Sasha shouted in a shrill voice, imitating Greg's aunt. "You've broken my little Greg's nose! I'll catch you just the same!"

Boris's dog, a black poodle called Rex, crawled out from under the bench, and gazed disdainfully at Sasha with his wise, watery eyes.

"Clever boy," said Boris and stroked Rex. "You're cleverer than a lot of people."

"He's dropping a hint," thought Sasha angrily. "Reckons as he's so clever, he's got to have a clever dog."

"Let's go down to the river, Katya," said Boris lazily. "Apparently, the church on the opposite bank's been flooded."

Look how easy it was for him to invite Katya down to the river!

Of course, it did not even enter his head to invite Sasha to go with them.

Sasha imagined Boris and Katya walking along the embankment. Side-by-side. And the embankment was ever so long. It'll take them all day. And then the street lamps would lit up along the embankment: a long bright string of light, stretching on and on for ever. No, he could not let this happen.

"There's no point you going there," he lied. "I was by the river today. The water's gone."

"When did you manage to find that out? Weren't you at school?" asked Katya, screwing up her eyes in disbelief.

"I just did," Sasha replied enigmatically.

"I suggested it yesterday," said Boris. "But you weren't in the mood, madam."

"So what, there's a flood every spring."

Katya bent down and started stroking Rex's head, and pressing it down.

"I'm dying to have a dog," she said. "I've pestered everyone to death at home. When I start talking about a dog, they all jam their fingers in their ears. I like seeing a girl walking along with a dog on a lead. Only it's got to be a big one, not a titch. It looks so lovely."

"Sounds like Chekhov's story of the lady and the lap-dog," smirked Boris.

'But so far mummy keeps suggesting a cat," sighed Katya.

"Well, then ask for a horse," advised Boris. "And then you're bound to be given a dog."

Katya laughed quietly, and glanced askance at Boris.

No, the two of them were in a world apart. It was as though an invisible barrier stood between them and Sasha: with them on one side, and him on the other. And he felt this only too well.

"What's so wonderful about cats and dogs!" chuckled Sasha, trying to destroy this barrier with sarcasm. "Why, I've got bears, monkeys and parrots at home!.. See!"

"You're lying," said Katya, not very confidently.

"Oh no, I'm not," replied Sasha, stopping at nothing. He'd passed the point of no-return. "My uncle's an animal tamer. He's travelled all over the country and he's staying with us at the moment."

"Come to stay with all his animals?" asked Boris, opening his eyes wide and pretending to be horrified.

"You think you're clever, don't you! There's no room at the circus. They've got some kind of quarantine. All the animals have got a fever. It's called animals' whooping cough, I think. Some sort of new disease. And that's why he's come to stay with us."

One thing he had achieved: Katya's eyes were now looking eagerly and with curiosity at him, and he must not let them slip away.

"And he also brought me a real double-barrel shotgun!" he went on, gasping for breath, as though he was racing somewhere. "With cartridges and a cartridge belt. It's hanging on the wall. Loaded. Now we can go shooting as often as we like... And we've also ... we've also got..." He

racked his brains but still couldn't come up with anything quickly.

"We've also got this big thing ... with ears and ... an engine... Come and see for yourself."

Floating past Sasha and blotting out the entire sky went a dirigible, rather like a huge silver cucumber to look at. Then a kangaroo sped by in huge leaps and bounds; and then a cannon thundered by, belching fire.

"A rocket... Aeroplane... Kangaplane..." he shrieked out, gasping for breath.

"That's a lie," Boris suddenly said soberly. "What's a kangaplane? Admit you mean some kind of atomic rocket."

"It's not a lie," yelled Sasha. "My uncle..."

And then he caught sight of his father striding down the street in a very brisk and businesslike manner, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Won't be a moment..." said Sasha and ran after him.

Strictly speaking, he did not need his father at all just then but he simply wanted to gain time to think up something more interesting.

He caught him up, tugged his sleeve and asked, "Where are you off to? What about Uncle Simon?"

"There's trouble..." replied his father absent-mindedly, without slowing down.

Sasha had to jog alongside him to keep hold of his sleeve. At the sound of the word "trouble" his heart leapt in a strange unpleasant way.

There was something familiar about the word but just then he could not remember what.

"My launch's disappeared somewhere. It left base and vanished. Goodness only knows where she's gone to. She was meant to be in the port to be loaded an hour ago," he said to himself rather than to Sasha.

A taxi appeared round the corner, rocking from side to side and spraying the pavement with flat jets of water.

It drenched an old woman in a long coat and a little girl in a pink hood. The little girl found it amusing and burst out laughing but the old woman shouted something angrily at the driver, shaking her fist, which was small and yellow like a lemon.

"Taxi! Taxi!" his father shouted out wildly and leapt straight through

the puddles across the street, brandishing his briefcase.

Then the old woman stopped shouting and burst out laughing too.

Sasha found all this highly unpleasant: both that his father was running straight through the puddles, covering the backs of his grey trousers with dirty blotches and that people were laughing at him.

The door banged hard and the taxi drove off without his father even glancing round.

Trouble... His father had trouble...

Oh no! He'd made up this lie about his father himself, right at the beginning when he'd spoken to his teacher. But then, you see, he had had no idea his lies were magic. He'd simply lied for no particular reason. But maybe things weren't so bad, after all? Well, so the launch was a bit late. So what? The river was flooded. Maybe, it takes longer now because of this.

He sauntered slowly back.

The bench was empty: it was the emptiest bench in the world. As deserted as could be, as if no one had ever set eyes on it before.

Katya and Boris had vanished into thin air. Their satchels had gone too. In the mud there were two sets of tracks and a trail of small dog's paw-prints nearby. The tracks led all the way to the dry asphalt path and then ended.

Sasha ran off down the path and all round the house but everywhere was deserted. Then he ran all the way to Boris's house but nobody was there either.

So he went back to the yard and saw Lena, all on her own as usual. Catching sight of him, just to be on the safe side she stepped right into the middle of a puddle where it was deepest and stood still on one leg.

"They've gone to do their prep at Boris's. On purpose. Just to spite me," thought Sasha angrily. "Right. Just you wait. I'll lie to you about something else... I'll get you yet..."

He wanted to feel happy and powerful again, just as he had been only a little while ago but instead he only felt tired and blank.

"I'll have something to eat and have a little rest a while before I start lying again..." he thought and set off home.

"I shouldn't have made that up about dad's work," he thought, as the lift carried him smoothly and indifferently upwards.

"Oh, nothing bad's going to happen," he reassured himself. "I mean, where could a big launch get to? You can't very well steal it and put it in your pocket, can you? And it can't sink either. I'll have to have a better think what to lie about. Only fools think lying's easy..."

The lift shuddered and stopped. Sasha came out of the lift and saw his apartment front door was open.

## Chapter 5

### UNCLE SIMON

Yes, the door really was open.

"Oh, dad's such a scatterbrain..." thought Sasha. "What if I'd done that? I can't imagine what a hullabaloo there'd have been!"

He walked into the hall and somehow did not recognise it. He even thought he had got the wrong apartment and was about to slip out unnoticed before he was mistaken for a burglar when suddenly he caught sight of his old skis in a corner and his mother's bright-coloured apron on a coat peg.

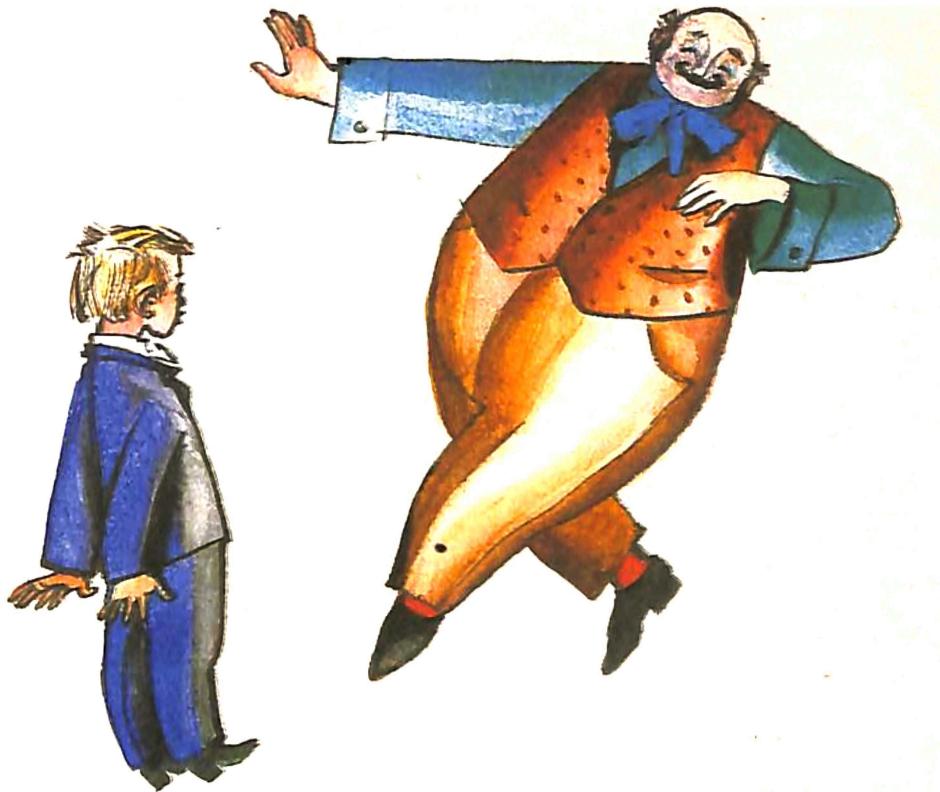
So, that was it! There was a pungent, unfamiliar smell in the apartment and he could not work out what it was. This is what had led him astray. It had never smelt like this before.

He sniffed hard several times and listened. Somewhere in the depths of the apartment something was softly rustling, and thudding against walls.

Shivers went up his spine and he automatically took several steps back to the door.

Just then an amazing-looking man appeared in the hall from the dark passageway.

He walked with unusual ease, in a bouncy way on the tips of his toes, his arms swinging at his sides, just as though he were floating through



the air. At the sight of Sasha he laid one hand on his heart, flung the other to the side and suddenly bowed low to Sasha, and Sasha now saw a round yellowish and slightly transparent-looking bald patch where his face had been only a moment ago.

It was all totally unexpected and incredible.

The amazing-looking man straightened and Sasha caught sight of his dark eyes and large square nose which looked as though it was being supported by the black bushy moustache underneath.

The strange man smiled.

Then Sasha's wonder increased even more for the man had exactly the

same smile as his mother. And though he was not a bit like his mother, he still smiled just like her.

“My nephew, right...” said the strange man, cocking his head and looking attentively at Sasha. “So this is what you’re like, mummy’s little treasure... Well, well... So, let’s get acquainted. I’m your uncle. Just call me Uncle Simon.”

Then he stooped and kissed Sasha on the cheek and fondly pulled his ear.

“I’m in a right mess, you know,” he said, wringing his hands in despair. “When I arrived today, what did I find?! The circus in quarantine. With some sort of new disease. Animals’ whooping cough, I think it’s called. The elephants have got a temperature. The lions are delirious. The crocodile and the circus director are flat on their backs. Honestly, have you ever heard of such a to-do?! You wouldn’t imagine it possible, not even in a dream. Well, I couldn’t very well sit in the street with all my lot, so I came straight over here to my sister’s. I rang the bell but nobody answered. It’s a good thing your neighbour’s such a sweet woman and gave me the keys to the apartment.”

Just then Sasha suddenly saw a monkey on his uncle’s shoulder. He had not the faintest idea where it had come from. Though not very big, it was still a real live monkey with hands like feet and feet like hands and a pretty little face like an old woman’s.

It buried its nose in Uncle Simon’s cheek and without looking, Uncle Simon casually tickled its tummy, and went on gazing round.

“Do you have a phone?” he asked suddenly.

Sasha was absolutely spellbound. He stood stock still, as if turned to ice, and hardly managed to nod his stiff head and point with his rigid arm towards the middle of the apartment.

Uncle Simon smiled just like his mother again, shoved the monkey straight into Sasha’s arms, and went off to use the telephone.

The monkey looked at Sasha with its deep mirthless eyes and started scratching its tummy with one paw and its back with the other. What’s more, it never stopped fidgeting for a second. Sasha’s arms immediately started aching from the strain and he even broke out into a sweat.

"Hello!" boomed Uncle Simon. "Is that the manager? This is Simon Beasto! Yes, speaking. Good day to you! What a disaster! Incredible! There must be some way out! Yes, yes! No, no! Three bears and four monkeys. What? Not four bears, but three! Not three monkeys, but four! Right. Thanks in advance. I'll be waiting by the phone."

Uncle Simon sighed loudly.

"But maybe it wasn't him who sighed just now?" thought Sasha, suddenly rather scared. It now seemed to him as though someone was shuffling about at the end of the corridor.

Meanwhile the monkey had clambered onto his shoulder, and he straightened his aching arms. But just then the monkey jumped straight onto his head, made itself comfortable and became sunk in thought. Sasha stood waiting meekly until it had finished.

All of a sudden it pushed hard off his head and leapt onto the wardrobe, and Sasha tottered like a wooden skittle.

"Bang!" went a pan, crashing from a kitchen shelf.

"Ting-a-ling-a-ling!" jingled its lid, coming to rest on the tiled floor.

"A strict time-table, my dear! A strict time-table!" Uncle Simon shouted down the receiver. "That's what matters most for the animals. I don't need to tell you what the animals are like these days. Why, they're all spoiled, nervous creatures, every single one of them. I spoon-feed them all at set times..."

With bated breath Sasha cautiously glanced inside the kitchen and at once — splat! — something hit him on the shoulder.

It was a raw egg and it started slowly oozing down the sleeve of his school uniform. He shook his arm, and it plopped onto the floor and in the middle of the floor he caught sight of several other nasty-looking pools of eggs like it.

Hearing a rustle, he looked up and saw another monkey sitting on a shelf among the pots and pans with its long paw inside a glass jar, trying to catch hold of an egg which kept rolling away.

No sooner had it managed to, than it quickly took aim at Sasha and he staggered back into the corridor and nearly bumped straight into Uncle Simon. His face was flushed now and his nose was shiny.

"My dear little nephew," he said, "My goodness, in all the hustle and

bustle I've quite forgotten I've brought you a little present. Your mother's going to kill me, and she'll be quite right, incidentally. I don't know myself why I bought it. Call it a brain storm, if you like."

And then Sasha noticed the superb double-barrel shotgun in his uncle's hands. It had two gleaming ebony barrels and a silver trigger.

"And here's its cartridge belt and cartridges," said Uncle Simon apologetically. "Oh why, why did I buy it?.. Do tell me!"

"It's really for me?" squeaked Sasha, beside himself with joy. "Oh, thank you, Uncle Simon!"

Uncle Simon sharply clasped the gun close to his body.

"Careful! It's loaded! Oh Lord, why did I load it? I don't understand myself... Old fool... We'll hang it on the wall for the time being but please, I beg you, don't touch it, whatever you do, all right?"

Tightly hugging the gun, Uncle Simon streaked along the corridor into Sasha's parents' room.

"What a fantastic lie I told about the gun," thought Sasha, thrilled to bits. "Dad would never let me! But now there's nothing he can do about it. It's a present and that's that. He can't say a word..."

But just then something rushed at Sasha from behind — something large, shaggy and round — and then the something uncurled and turned into a bear!

Sasha pressed himself against the wall but at that moment a tail brushed across his face. He automatically grabbed hold of it and found, to his horror, that it came away in his hand. He flicked it away in disgust but it had got caught in his button and remained hanging limply on him.

However, he then saw it wasn't a tail after all but the sleeve of his mother's blue and white polka-dot cardigan. And the rest of mother's cardigan was galloping along the corridor past him, waving the other sleeve. Sasha dived after it and it leapt straight off the floor and onto the wardrobe.

The chandelier started emitting anxious tinklings. Sasha looked up and saw yet another monkey sitting astride it, pushing off from the ceiling with its long narrow foot and swinging it from side to side.

The phone rang in the corridor and Sasha seized hold of the receiver. "Maybe it's mum," he wondered hopefully. But it was his father.

"Has he arrived, then?" he asked impatiently.

"Yes..." Sasha replied in a whisper for some reason or other and glanced round.

"Oh..." said his father wearily. "Well, come on then, call him to the phone."

"Will you be home soon?"

"I don't know, I don't know anything. It's so annoying, I'm just sitting here and waiting for my launch. Nobody knows anything about it. Come on, hurry up..."

Sasha handed the receiver to Uncle Simon who boomed down the phone, "Victor! You old river pirate! My goodness, what a long time it's been..."

Meanwhile Sasha went into his room because he had heard strange groans and grunts coming from the other side of the door. And with an unpleasant foreboding he opened the door...

## Chapter 6

### FAREWELL TO "NEW GUINEA" AND THE MIRROR

He froze. In the middle of the room there was a large, rich brown bear which was sitting just like a teddy bear on a shop shelf, with all four paws spread out.

With his heavy head inclined to one side, he went on munching something, as he gazed craftily at Sasha with his beady eyes.

Then he sighed deeply but with satisfaction, and you could tell that he found whatever he was munching very tasty indeed.

Sasha took a closer look and gasped. The bear's round belly was covered all over with flowers: ox-eyed daisies and bluebells were sticking quaintly out of his thick fur.

"My flowers!.." hissed Sasha. "Do you reckon I picked them all just for you?"

He stepped forward and then quickly back again. Who knew, perhaps the bear was not very well trained or even half wild?

Then all of a sudden he caught sight of his stamp album on the floor

between the bear's outspread paws. It was all crumpled, torn and chewed to bits. Just then the rotten beast, not in the least embarrassed, lowered one of his paws, tore another page out, calmly stuffed it into his mouth and started lazily munching away with a frown on his face.

"Uncle Simon! Uncle Simon!" howled Sasha in despair.

Rubbing his red ear, Uncle Simon popped his head round the door. Sasha pointed at the bear with his hands, head and whole body.

An anguished look appeared on Uncle Simon's face.

"Oh..." he gasped guiltily. "I didn't look properly... I've got myself in a real twist with all this business... Oh dear, fancy something like this happening." He picked up the stamp album and removed the flowers from the bear's stomach. What was left of them made a pathetic, limp bouquet.

The telephone rang again in the corridor.

"That's for me!" exclaimed Uncle Simon and dashed out the room.

Sasha looked at the bear with hatred: "What does he care? But what about 'New Guinea'? He's probably already digested it..."

"It's for you, young man," said Uncle Simon in a formal tone, standing in the doorway and bowing to Sasha, "if I'm not mistaken, it's a young lady."

Sasha picked up the warm receiver which had been heated up well by Uncle Simon's ear. His heart started beating hard.

"Sasha," said Katya in a low voice, quite unlike her own but Sasha still recognised her at once. Unable to stop herself, Katya suddenly burst out giggling and then whispered to someone, "Stop it!" Boris must be standing beside her. Of course, it was Boris, who else could it be? They were probably huddled together in a call box.

"Oh, it's you," replied Sasha, trying to sound cool and indifferent.

"Who was that just now?" asked Katya.

"My uncle," Sasha replied triumphantly.

"No, really?" asked Katya, now in her normal voice. "But what about his animals?"

"They're here too. Where else could they be?" he replied, almost bursting with joy. "Come and see for yourself."



"No, really?" She was silent for a moment and Sasha could hear her breathing.

"We're on our way to a football match," she said regretfully and then added in a pleading tone: "But may I on the way back?"

"Suit yourself. Come by when you like."

"Aren't you going to the match?"

"I haven't got a ticket," he replied confusedly.

"Why, I've got a spare one! Do you want it?" she suddenly suggested. "It's none of your business, belt up!" she suddenly whispered fiercely to the person beside her.

Fancy that! Katya was inviting him to the match herself. And even offering him a ticket! And Boris was seeing it all. Since he was standing beside her, he was bound to be listening to everything.

"Well, why not," Sasha just managed to reply in a quiet, steady voice.

"See you in half an hour in my yard. Okay?"

"Okay."

Sasha heard short pips down the receiver. He stood and listened to them and they reminded him of a little chain connecting him with Katya, and he did not want to put the receiver down.

All of a sudden there was a tremendous crash in his parents' room: something dreadful had happened. It sounded as though all the walls and the ceiling had caved in at once.

Uncle Simon came running into the corridor from the kitchen, chewing something, his face as white as a sheet and, set against it, his black moustache looked as though it was sticking up on end. He minced past Sasha and Sasha rushed after him at top speed. In the doorway they collided into each other and got stuck.

Then roaring and shuddering, a heavy fur coat crashed down on top of them and then all three of them went tumbling into the room together.

The room was full of fog or smoke, it was impossible to tell which. Plaster was showering down from the ceiling, and trembling and jingling, the mirror was cracking up into sharp little pieces.

One of the monkeys was standing in the middle of the room and holding

the shotgun in its quivering paws, and the bear cubs were huddled in a corner, whining plaintively.

All of a sudden some yellow and green parrots flew straight out of Uncle Simon, it seemed, and began circling over Sasha's head, flapping their wings loudly.

Then they began blindly crashing into the windowpanes, and yellow and green feathers fluttered through the air.

The monkey dropped the gun, grabbed hold of Uncle Simon's leg and, chattering plaintively, clung to it with all its body.

The smoke cleared and the white dust settled on the floor. Bits of plaster continued to flake off the ceiling. A black hole could now be seen near the chandelier.

"Well, my sister will certainly know I'm here... Haven't seen her for twenty years," groaned Uncle Simon. "Oh, it would have been better if I hadn't turned up for another fifty... What an old fool!" Uncle Simon banged his brow with his fist in a temper.

"What a fool I was to lie about these animals," Sasha thought angrily. He could not bear looking at Uncle Simon's guilty, anguished face. "And I could have done without the gun as well."

"Uncle Simon," he began, not knowing how to comfort him. "Never mind... Dad was going to redecorate the apartment in summer anyway. And the mirror..."

He stopped. He knew his mother would be upset because she believed broken mirrors were bad omens and grew alarmed even when a small round hand-mirror once broke. And this mirror covered the entire wardrobe!

Uncle Simon went on sighing and tutting and even lashed out at a completely innocent cub. The cub took umbrage and rolled under the table. Oh, how messy things had turned out! What a good thing, though, Boris had not believed about the rocket.

"It's two o'clock," sighed Uncle Simon. "Time to feed them. I think I'll make them some porridge."

Shuffling his feet wearily, as though he had grown old suddenly, Uncle Simon went back to the kitchen.

And Sasha, without saying a word, tiptoed into the hall and out onto



the landing. He closed the door shut behind him: all they needed was for these creatures to go running off all over the house! Then he rushed headlong downstairs.

## Chapter 7

### TICKETS TO THE FOOTBALL MATCH

Katya kept glancing impatiently at the gates, waiting for him to appear. She was standing on a dry patch in the middle of the yard in full sunlight, and wearing pale blue stockings and a small matching blue

knitted hat. Next to her was Boris, of course, who was gazing languidly at an empty bird-box in a bare tree.

And Lena was standing all on her own on a damp muddy path not far away.

She was wearing an old ski jacket which had once been Katya's. Only whereas the latter had grown out of it a long time ago, Lena had still not grown into it, and it was still far too long for her. Sticking out from under it, her legs looked no thicker than ropes and her knees like knots which had been tied in these ropes.

"Let's go. We're only just going to make it," said Katya, heading towards the gates.

Lena started off after them, shuffling along in her mud-splattered boots and keeping at a distance.

At the gates, however, Katya turned round and said to her in a threatening tone: "What did I say to you — go home! And don't you dare follow us!"

"You seem to be muddling her up with the dog you're going to get," laughed Boris ironically.

Katya replied, laughing, "I know them — the stricter you are with them, the better. Otherwise they're ever such a bind... Well, how's your uncle?" she asked Sasha, and gazed at him with her amazingly light eyes, half-hidden behind her black fringe.

"All right," said Sasha, not knowing what to say.

Glancing round, he spotted Lena who was still timidly but stubbornly following them. They got onto a completely empty trolley-bus and Lena clambered into the front as well.

She gazed reproachfully right down the trolley-bus at Sasha, and from her offended and sad face Sasha suddenly realised that it was Lena's ticket Katya had given him. It had not been spare at all. It had been Lena's. His heart twanged sharply as though a clothes-peg had been clipped onto it — the kind his mother used to secure the washing to the rope on the balcony so that the wind did not blow it away.

"Thickhead," he cursed himself. "I should have lied to Katya that I already had a ticket. I never lie when I need to, only when I don't."

The nearer they got to the stadium, the more crowded the trolleybus became. In the end, a fat woman hid Lena from view.

By the stadium all the passengers poured out at once, and the bus, empty and see-through, rumbled round in a circle and started back again.

All the people started running towards the stadium, pulling their tickets out of their pockets and bags as they went. Sasha could see flashes of Katya's blue stockings.

He looked round and saw Lena standing by a grey wall, minute and totally unwanted.

"I'll give her some of my stamps and flowers..." he thought, conscience-striken, and then instantly remembered he had none left. "I'll give her something good just the same..."

There was no time to think. People were prodding and pushing from behind and the ticket collector angrily snatched his ticket out of his hesitant hands herself. Before he knew what was happening, he was forcing his way between the long benches behind Boris and Katya.

A march was blaring and the players were already trotting out onto the field: one team in striped shirts, the other in red shirts.

"Who are you going to support?" Sasha asked Katya after they were seated. Boris, of course, supported the red shirts because they all came from the factory his dad worked at as an engineer.

"The winners, I suppose," said Katya confidently. "It's horrid when they lose. But I prefer boxing any day."

"Death to the losers!" muttered Boris.

Sasha was sitting next to Katya. He had never even hoped this might ever happen.

He tried not to think about anything bad such as Lena or his mother going into their apartment and clasping her hands in despair.

"Later, later..." he thought. "It can all come later..."

Glancing sideways he saw Katya's round head, blue hat and black fringe. Now all he wanted from life was for the striped shirts to win. And the players most likely knew it for they played like gods and scored two goals in the first ten minutes.

Katya kept gasping and shrieking. Her cheeks were burning and it seemed to Sasha that he could feel their heat on his own. She even pounded

the man in front of her on his round back with her fist. All of a sudden a tall young man leapt up and his blue windcheater slid off his shoulders, and Sasha caught a glimpse of his striped tee-shirt.

“Come on, come on, lads!” he yelled.

His broad striped shoulders, the back of his head and his ears seemed terribly familiar to Sasha.

“Surely that’s not Sergei, the engineer from dad’s launch? Dad’s waiting at the port while he’s here, watching football? No, that can’t be so.”

Someone tugged the young man’s sleeve and he sat down.

“No, I was wrong,” Sasha reassured himself.

At half-time Sasha dashed off to buy himself and Katya ice-creams. Then he again remembered about Lena and thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea at least to take her a choc ice... In his mind’s eye he could see her standing by the wall with her thin little legs sticking out of her huge jacket.

“No, she must have gone home by now,” he thought. “She wouldn’t wait so long.”

From then on things went even better. Katya even nudged him twice with her elbow.

The match was drawing to an end and the score was 4:0. Boris was now completely downcast and silent.

And then something strange happened. Sasha saw someone steadily forcing his way between the rows, and then bend over someone, and the same tall young man in the striped tee-shirt immediately jumped up again. This time Sasha saw perfectly clearly that he was, in fact, Sergei, the engineer from his dad’s launch.

Holding onto his jacket to stop it from slipping off his shoulders, Sergei started hurriedly heading for the exit. He climbed over benches, moving people apart, and he gently pushed one short man down and walked over him.

Then, for some reason other people started noisily getting to their feet and making their way between the rows towards the exit, blocking out the light and people’s views. Suddenly Sasha also spotted Misha from his father’s launch.

"Why, Misha's here too!" he thought in surprise. "I wonder where they've put the launch?"

"Our side's won," Katya said gloatingly to Boris.

"Oh, but of course!" replied Boris. "Who's arguing? Only remember, my ladyship, that football is a sport for people who care more about their legs than their brains."

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Katya huffily.

They were jostled and prodded by the crowd, and Sasha immediately felt small again. He had sat and watched the match like an adult but now he hardly came up to most people's shoulders. His nose was pushed into someone's sleeve and he suddenly saw Katya's pompon sticking out by a large man's elbow.

They were swept out into the square along with the crowd. Sasha stealthily glanced sideways at the place where they had left Lena.

There was no sign of her. Instead, there was a fat little girl in a red coat by the wall, licking an ice cream with her sharp triangular tongue.

"She's gone..." thought Sasha sadly.

Three empty trolley-buses were standing one behind the other at the stop.

Usually there was a lot of bustle by the trolley-buses as the queue grew, and the drivers went hoarse, begging passengers to wait for the next trolley-bus.

Now, too, a few people started running towards the stop but even they gradually slowed up and stopped in bewilderment and for some reason or other everyone was staring towards the river.

"Look!" exclaimed a tall man excitedly, stretching his arm and briefcase out.

"That's odd," said Katya. "I wonder if someone's been run over? Only if there's blood, I can't bear to look," she added and wrinkled her face.

"We'll soon see," muttered Boris.

## Chapter 8

### ON THE CLIFF TOP

The crowd poured down the slope. The older people carefully followed the narrow paths while most of the others took a short cut across the last year's grass. The little boys leapt over the hollows which still had some dirty snow with black crusts.

From above you could see the blue roof and yellow tables of the cafeteria, which stood on the cliff directly above the river and was picturesquely called The Surf Spray Cafe. From above, the round yellow tables looked like little saucers.

But all the people who had been sitting at the tables were now huddled together on the edge of the cliff. And the others who had run down the slope were also trying to get as close to the edge as possible, and so the crowd kept growing.

"Oh, get a move on, will you," urged Katya. "We'll miss all the fun. Come on, boys, let's hold hands and run. Only hold onto me tight or else I'll fall."

Sasha squeezed her soft hand and they sped down the slope. Katya kept squealing. The cold wind whistled in their ears. Sasha stumbled and they all nearly went tumbling head over heels. The dazzling sun, the sky and the soaring clouds made them dizzy...

It was wonderful but it ended too quickly. Sasha would not have minded running down this hill for a whole year but Katya was already wriggling her fingers and trying to free her hand from his.

Everyone was pushing and trying to get closer to the edge. The lucky ones on the very edge kept talking among themselves, exclaiming and gasping:

"Just look, look, it's lying on its side!"

"Well I never! Well, I'll be blowed!"

"They've certainly had it now!"

"They won't get their heads patted for this!"

"Help! Help! My feet are slipping! I'm falling off!"

"Calm down! Don't lean forwards!"

"There's clay here! We're all going to fall over!"

"Floods are very complicated things," said a sly-looking grey-haired man next to Sasha. "The water may subside in an hour. But that's young people nowadays for you! They think they know everything."

"As far as you're concerned, young people are to blame for everything!"

"And so they are," retorted the sly-looking old man, livening up and even looking pleased. "Judge for yourselves. See, they've tied the rope to a tree, and where have they gone to themselves? That's obvious! To the cafe. To the football match. But what about their sense of responsibility, where's that? There it is!"

The old man just managed to free one arm and stretch it menacingly towards the cliff.

"There's something interesting down there," said Katya excitedly, elbowing her way through the crowd.

"Oh, Lord, how shocking..." sadly said an old woman in a dark scarf and stepped back from the edge.

Sasha and Katya instantly pushed forward into her place. Sasha craned his neck, looked down and froze.

Never before had he felt so terrified and sick at heart.

His father's launch was lying on her side on the narrow strip of beach beneath the cliff.

How pathetic and comic she looked lying there on her side in the sand! The blue letters of her name stood out very clearly and anyone who cared to could read: *Stepan Razin*. She looked terribly vulnerable somehow, most likely because every part of her, including even her keel, was visible. Her propeller was jutting up with a bunch of seaweed stuck to it. The cabin door was wide open.

All the things inside were piled against one wall. Although it was dark inside, you could still see some white pillows and a jug sprawling on top of them. Books and pots and pans were all jumbled together.

Very closeby someone was laughing and blowing hot air onto Sasha's ear. He looked round in a daze and saw it was Katya. He stared into her screwed-up light eyes.

She went on laughing softly and he could feel her shoulders trembling. And every sound of her voice sent excruciating shots of pain straight through his heart.

"That's your father's vehicle, isn't it?" said Boris.

"Really!" gasped Katya and crept so close to the edge that damp clods of clay started plopping down.

A young lad with a guitar leapt off the cliff and started dancing round the launch, sinking into the wet sand. He kept his legs bent at the knees all the time and looked amazingly like a monkey.

Then other strapping, long-legged lads began jumping down after him.

The lad who looked like a monkey tossed his guitar over his back and clumsily scrambled aboard, catching hold of all sorts of things in his way, as though he was on a mound of scrap metal. His shoes left grey striped footprints on the beautifully clean and fresh-looking white deck. Up on the hull, he stamped his feet to see if the boat would wobble.

Then he cupped his hands round his mouth, pulled a funny face and shouted out in a silly voice: "Someone out there has lost a little boat! Will that person please come and see me. If not... Finders — keepers!"

And then he began stamping his feet and doing a ridiculous war dance. How could he? After all, something awful had happened. And they were laughing as well...

"There's your dad," said Boris coolly.

Sasha started searching for his father with his eyes. His heart was pounding. He was afraid his father would start sobbing or cursing in despair.

However, his father stood aloof, his face calm. His cap was lying on the ground beside him but he did not pick it up. All his crew members were huddled together behind him.

Sergei the engineer was standing with his curly head bowed low. Everything about him — his powerful frame, slouching shoulders, drooping arms and even the stripes of his tee-shirt — looked guilty somehow.

Sasha ran up to his father.

"So you're here too," his father said absent-mindedly and stroked Sasha's head, which he had not done for years. His father, you see, treated him like a grown-up and kept their relations formal and manly.

"Captain," said Sergei, coming up from behind, in a trembling voice. His face was flushed and even his eyes were red. "How were we to know that the water level would drop? Well, we thought we'd just moor here and go and watch the football. We knew we'd be not more than an hour late. Who on earth could imagine something like this was going to happen? Does this mean we'll be sued?"

A saloon car screeched to a halt by the cafe and four people jumped out at once: two in uniform, a strict-looking woman in large spectacles, carrying a thick briefcase and a very old little man with a kind face and a fairly long grey beard. The wind immediately started playing with it, and the old man clutched it in his fist, as though afraid it might tear loose and fly away.

Everyone in the crowd started bustling and making way for them.

Sasha gazed sorrowfully at their backs, already fretting about what they were going to see.

And sure enough, they went up to the edge and stood perfectly still. Only the little old man kept slightly back and, tucking his beard into his coat, craned his neck and peered down at the launch from a distance.

For some reason Sasha immediately began hoping that this old man would come up with some idea that would help.

"Mmm, she's in real trouble," the old man said in a shrill voice.

Sasha compressed his lips. Trouble... Oh, blast!

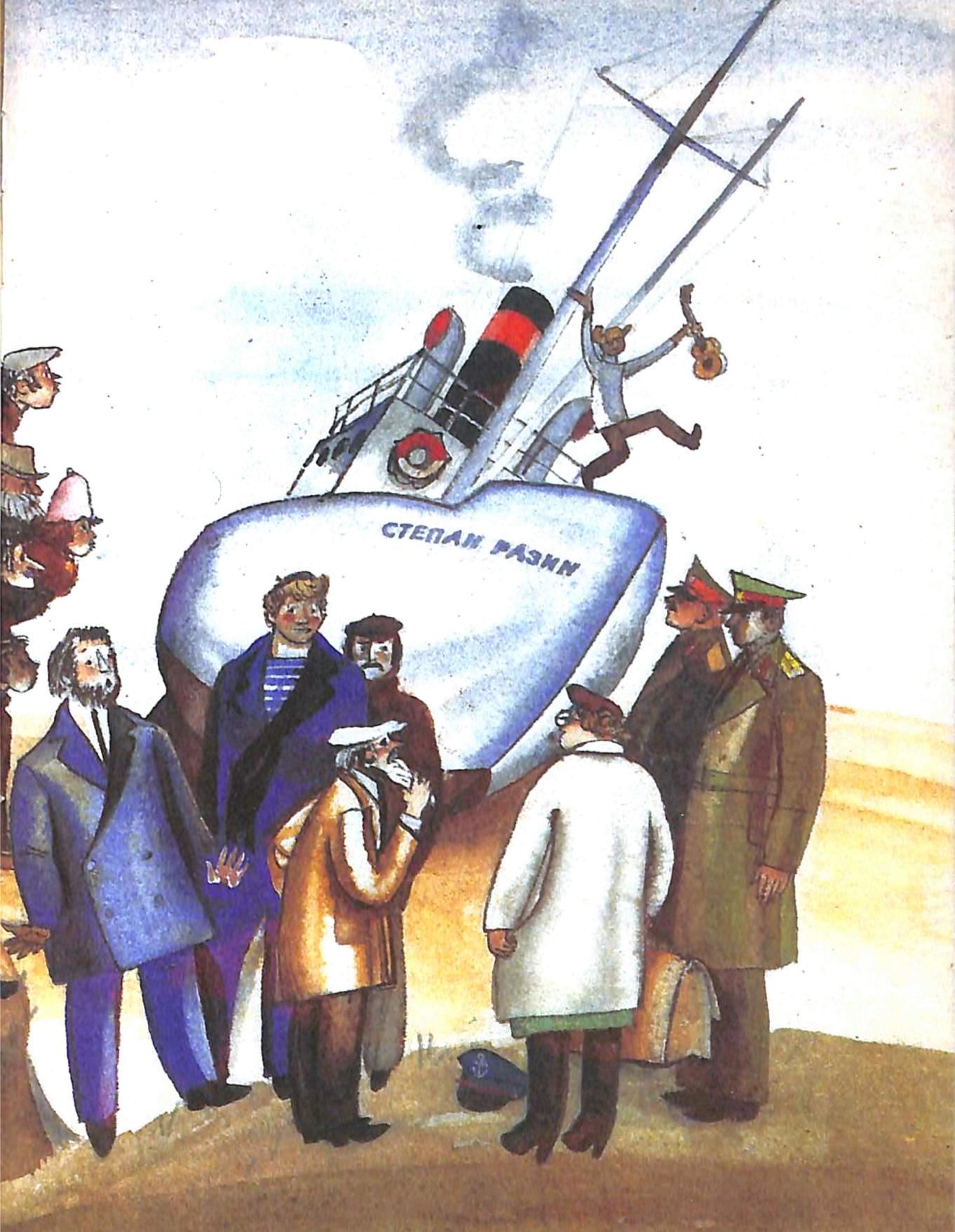
His father was about to step up to them and say something but the tall man in uniform stopped him with a cold gesture.

"What do you think?" he asked the others with him.

"It's an extremely complex situation," replied the shorter man in uniform.

"It's terrible," said the strict-looking woman. She took off her glasses to look down at the boat and then put them on again.

"It shows a total lack of discipline, complete negligence!"



СТЕПАН РАЗИН

"Perhaps rollers would help? We could grease some planks and slid her into the water?"

"But how on earth would you get her onto the planks?"

"How about using jacks?"

"Just look at the surface here? Why, it's wet, even soaking wet sand."

"Yes, that's the whole problem."

The old man cocked his head on one side, put a wisp of beard into his mouth and started chewing it, and then he frowned as though his beard tasted sour. "This is what I say. It would be simplest of all to leave the launch here until next year. The spring floods will lift it off the sand for us."

"What? Till next year?"

"Well, I must say, this is a fine pickle!"

Sasha's father started muttering something inaudible through pursed lips.

"Just look at her. Believe you me, it'll cost you a fair penny to get her into the water again."

"Maybe we could dig a trench."

"Sure... And if there was a railway track nearby..."

"Oh, splendid! Absolutely marvellous! I'm delighted. Why not lay a track here and set up a station! That's all we need," the old man piped up again. "We must wait until next year, I tell you."

"Dad..." said Sasha, thoroughly miserable.

"Off you go, off you go," said his father.

This was too much for Sasha to bear. His father's expression was breaking his heart.

He walked hesitantly back to the crowd, still gazing at his father and backed straight into Lena. She sobbed. Her eyes looked tear-stained and her sharp little nose had been turned blue by the cold wind blowing from the river.

"Oh, but what if..." An idea suddenly flashed through his head. "But what if I lied again? Just once more. Yes, for the very last time... Yes, what would I lose? Until next year, you say? Right. Now we're going to see next year..."

He glanced round quickly, grabbed Lena's hand and squeezed it with

all his might, and he could not help marvelling how thin it was. But Lena was their saving grace and he could not possibly let her go now.

So he dragged her after him. To start off with, she tried to resist but then she ran silently and meekly after him.

He dragged her behind a blue outhouse where empty bottles were stacked in crates one behind the other, and pressed her back against the crates.

"What were you crying for?" he asked quickly.

"I feel sorry for the boat..." she sobbed quietly, standing timidly before him as though he were a teacher, with her arms lowered and her head raised. Only she kept blinking hard because her tears had stuck her eyelashes together.

"So do I! But why cry when you don't know what's going to happen,"



he said for some reason in a whisper, leaning towards her. "Any moment now the water's going to come and lift the launch... boat up again!"

"Honest?" She tried to smile with her frozen blue lips but the corners of her mouth sagged. "Your dad told you that, did he?"

The roar of the crowd drowned Lena's timid voice. The men were droning and the women shrieking.

"It's covering my legs!" shouted one.

"Come on, come on! Use your brains, will you!"

"Give me a hand, a hand! What are you looking at? Pull me up!"

"Help! I'm drowning!"

Sasha had no time for Lena now. He turned the corner of the outhouse and tore straight through the thick mud and puddles towards the edge.

Water was noisily gushing in and flooding the narrow beach.

All the crowd down there were hopping about, scrambling onto the cliff and sliding down again. And the waves were breaking over them and spraying them with cloudy foam.

The lad who looked like a monkey was stamping about the hull, and gazing in bewilderment at the rising water. At last, he plucked up courage and jumped off, his guitar twanging plaintively.

By now the water was up to his knees. He started wading quickly towards the cliff, gasping desperately every time he took a step. Then he scrambled up the cliff, dirtying his wet trousers with clay.

"Serves you right!" thought Sasha.

Meanwhile the water kept pouring in, the murky waves gurgled and rose higher and higher and the launch came to life and started stirring like a living creature.

Sasha searched for his father with his eyes, and spotted him standing on the very edge of the cliff, staring hard at the launch. Then Sergei the engineer came rushing up from behind, his mouth wide open in amazement.

"Incredible!" whispered the tall man in uniform.

"I can tell there's going to be trouble," muttered the small old man and coughed, choking on his beard. "Where's the water coming from?

But, whatever the case, this by no means shifts the blame from the guilty party..."

"How nasty he is..." thought Sasha.

Meanwhile the blue and white launch, as beautiful as ever, started bobbing on the waves. Sasha was so excited, he felt a lump rise to his throat and something make his nose quiver and his eyes sting.

One by one, all the crew members clambered aboard. Then his father jumped on unaided, ignoring Sergei's extended hand, which meant he was angry with him.

But just then all Sasha wanted was for them to get away as quickly as possible from the crowd's idle stares.

"Sail away! Sail away!" he silently ordered.

And they did. The engine started rumbling and roaring and the launch started moving away from the shore.

His heart went on palpitating as he watched the blue and white launch sail away, shrinking all the time until it became a mere grey speck on the grey expanse of water.

## Chapter 9

### ALONG EMPTY STREETS

When Sasha was more or less back to normal, he glanced round and saw that everyone had already gone. Only a few people with cold red noses were sitting at the cafe tables and hungrily eating steaming sausages. Every now and then they would pick up their cups of coffee and warm their hands against them.

A grey storm-cloud had blotted out the sun, and a piercing damp wind was blowing off the river.

Sasha trudged slowly uphill.

The wind chased after him in spiteful squalls, blowing right through him as though he was full of holes. He longed to have something to eat and dive into bed under a warm blanket, and his mother to sit down beside him...

As he scrambled uphill, the sky became as grey as lead and sank low over the square.

A mile-long queue had formed by the trolley-bus stop. Somewhere near the front he spotted Katya in her blue hat. She kept turning her head, perhaps, looking for him.

He hid behind a tall man in a shaggy coat. Somehow he did not want to ride home with Katya. In fact, he did not even want to look at her.

He had to wait a long time. The crowd squeezed together and then stretched out like an accordion but got no smaller because not a single trolley-bus came along.

The people in front started getting annoyed and bad-tempered. Then a woman with her coat flapping open ran along the queue, mopping her flushed face with her headscarf.

"There'll be no trolley-buses coming!" she shouted, gasping for breath.

"Why on earth not!" someone shouted from the queue and chuckled.  
"What will we get then?"

The woman stopped.

"Nothing! There's been an accident at the power station, understand? No electricity, you see. You'll have to go on foot."

"Oh, no," someone behind Sasha groaned wearily. "So that's where the water's come from. There's a reason for everything. Of course, the dam's broken. What else could have happened?"

Sasha stopped dead in his tracks and only his heart went on thudding loudly.

Then all of a sudden he dived out of the crowd and broke into a run, pushing people aside, and bumping blindly into others.

"Look at that madman!" said a familiar mocking voice, which sounded like Boris's, but he did not care now...

He ran across the square at top speed, pushing so desperately hard off the ground with his feet that they started aching.

So that's what happened when you lied! Now he was really stuck. And whatever you lied, the worse things became. He must get to his mother! As soon as possible! But what could she do? No, the main thing was to get home.

"Oh," he groaned, suddenly realising his mother would, of course, be at the power station. As there was an accident there, she was sure to have been called in.

He ran down a long street in which empty, lifeless, dark trolley-buses were standing.

Icy rain-drops slashed across his arms and face. The asphalt around grew dark. But suddenly the rain stopped and only cumbrous storm-clouds scudded across the sky, their lilac edges catching on the rooftops.

Gazing at Sasha through their deep black windows, the houses also looked dark and lifeless. There was not a single light on in any of them.

Sasha felt scared. Somehow his steps sounded too loud and resonant in the silence. It seemed someone was running after him. He glanced round but there was nobody.

"It's my lies chasing after me," he suddenly thought. "They're pursuing me."

Too tired to run on, he leaned against a lamp-post, and rasping sobs burst painfully from his chest. He shook with fear and wound his arms round the lamp-post. Suddenly he felt with his spine that someone was behind him and glancing round, caught sight of Lena standing and gazing at him in silence.

He did not even feel surprised, as if this was the way things ought to be. And he did not even wipe his wet cheeks. Let her see, for all he cared! He instantly forgot all about her and ran off again.

And when he stopped at a corner to get his breath back, he saw her beside him again.

"Leave me alone. Go on. You won't keep up anyway," he said, panting in exhaustion and despair.

"No..." she whispered breathlessly, looking steadily at him, "I'm used to it... I'm always running... Away from Greg... And the boys... And Katya... I'm used to it..."

So they ran on side-by-side. Sasha ran as fast as he could. His throat was parched and he had a terribly painful stitch in his side.

He stopped near a blue kiosk. Its glass window was closed. There

seemed to be a faint glow coming from the woman in a white cap inside. The syrup in jars looked black.

"Water... Fizzy water... Two glasses," Sasha asked hoarsely.

The woman leaned her face forward and squashed her nose against the window-pane, making it turn white.

"I wouldn't mind some either. Huh, water, my foot! I haven't any!" she snapped, looking at Sasha and then at Lena. Then her face suddenly softened and she opened the window.

"Shall I give you some syrup instead, then," she suggested wearily.

"What, no water? How come there's no water?" asked Sasha, even rather plaintively.

"The dam's broken, they say. The town's water supply has been cut off."

With a sad look on her face she suddenly said, "My washing's not done at home and I haven't cooked the lunch." And you couldn't tell whether she was addressing her complaint to Sasha, or the jars of syrup.

He leapt away from the kiosk.

So there was already no water! That's how bad things had got! If he lied just once more, everything would go completely topsy-turvy! The whole town! And not just the town! Everything! No, he couldn't go home... He had to get to *The Encyclopedia of Magic*! He simply had to! Why hadn't that occurred to him straightaway? It had called him 'unfortunate one', and he certainly was! "If, stooping under the weight of your lies, you..." And I certainly am! And it had also said: "If you wish everything to be as it was before..." Oh, I do, I do!

Sasha broke into a run again, forgetting all about Lena. But when he had run out of breath and slowed down, he again saw her running along beside him as though she was all legs, and had no problem keeping up with him.

They ran on along the dark empty streets. Sasha's legs kept buckling under him and his soles burned.

There was a lorry standing by the pavement. Sasha ran up to it on his last legs, stopped and leaned his chest against it. The lorry's bonnet was

raised and its driver was stooping over it, tightening something and sighing.

"Please give me a lift," Sasha pleaded in a desperate voice. "Which way are you going? I need to go that way... It's very urgent..."

The driver looked up. He was ginger-haired and even his eyes were ginger. And his lips, too. They smiled sadly.

"I've no water in my radiator. That's it, lad. Now we're going to sunbathe."

"Let's run, come on," said Lena, running up. "We're almost there."

Lena, of course, knew nothing. How could she? But something instinctively told her they had to run. She guessed there was danger.

They ran down several long streets. The houses stretched on and on and did not want to end. No matter how hard he tried not to, he kept stopping more often. His feet were simply dropping off. Once he stumbled and even clutched hold of Lena, and her fragile shoulder-bones felt just like a chicken's.

At last they ran out into the square which was only a stone's throw away from Katya's house and her ill-starred attic.

All of a sudden the heavy red rays of the setting sun penetrated a dark narrow storm-cloud and the windows of the house opposite became dazzlingly bright.

"We're nearly there, nearly there..." whispered Lena beside him. "Not far now..."

He ran straight across the square, and Lena clumsily seized his hand between her cold fingers. He dived into the stream of traffic.

Wheels hissed, and a blue saloon car screeched to a halt, and the passengers were flung forward. Someone let out a stifled scream.

To the right someone honked loudly and to the left a motorbike skidded and screeched.

Apples came tumbling out of something and bounced across the road in all directions. A militiaman blew his whistle in a fierce, authoritative manner but by this time Sasha was already half-way across the square.

"You won't catch me," he thought.

All of a sudden he saw someone running towards him with someone else dragging along behind but as the sun was in his eyes, he could not

make out who it was. He twisted to the left and right. Then he could tell by the skirt and heels that it was a woman running towards him. He tried to run round her but she pounced on him, blocking out the sun, and he felt her steel grasp on his shoulder.

He looked up and froze. It was her, Greg's aunt, the dentist.

"Caught you at last!" she said, panting hard. "You thug! You've broken my boy's nose. You reckoned you'd escape, did you? Well, I've dashed out without even putting my coat on..."

## Chapter 10

### GREG'S AUNT THE DENTIST

There was a terribly familiar ring to these words of hers...  
In a trice it all came back to him.

Yes, Katya and Boris had been sitting on the bench. He remembered Katya gazing at him from under her black fringe. How incredibly strong and intrepid he wanted to seem to her then! And now look what had happened!..

Greg's aunt had on a mauve dress and a violet hat and dangling round her neck were some white beads, which all looked just like extracted teeth.

She was wheezing hard, and there was a glint in her predatory eyes.

She was dragging her nephew Greg along by the hand, and he was resisting which made his arm look very long. And he had his other hand over his nose.

Sasha did not even recognise him at first, and certainly not because he was shielding his nose. He would have recognised him from the back or the side, or any way else by his famous walk, and by his fringe — the longest in the neighbourhood. Well, and just because it was impossible not to recognise tough and aggressive Greg or mix him up with anybody else.

But now it seemed as if this was not Greg at all.

He was all hunched up and cowering, and looked perfectly ordinary, just like anyone else.

"Caught you," said Greg's aunt with laboured breath. There was a triumphant and exhausted note in her voice. "You're caught now, my dear!"

At the sound of her rasping voice several passers-by turned round and some stopped and stared at them.

"Thanks to you, my dear, I've aged ten years today. It was hard going but I've caught you!"

A crowd started gathering round them but this is just what Greg's aunt wanted.

"Just look at him! Just look!" she said excitedly, glancing round and shaking Sasha's shoulder violently. "Just look what he's done to Greg?!" She drew Greg closer to her. "My boy! He was walking quietly round the yard all by himself, doing nobody any harm when this bully jumped on him for no reason at all and ... I saw it myself out of the window. Show your nose!"

But Greg refused to.

"Oh..." she gasped, not knowing what to do next. She was afraid to let go of Sasha for a second but dared not release her nephew either. What she needed was obviously a third hand. "Greg, do as I say and show your nose!"

But Greg only stretched his head out like a tortoise. Then she deftly grabbed hold of Greg's other hand and started pulling it down. Greg gave in, closed his eyes and humbly pointed his nose forward.

It looked just like any nose. Well, yes, it was red, and, yes, it was a bit swollen but so what? Sasha had seen far worse in his time but Greg's aunt started simply erupting at the sight of it.

Energetically making his way through the crowd, a militiaman came up to them.

"Why did you run across the road like that?" he asked sternly and put his hand on Sasha's other shoulder.

"So he's a public menace as well as a thug!" exclaimed Greg's aunt with pleasure. "I knew this was going to happen ... yes..."



“I’m trapped...” thought Sasha hopelessly.

The militiaman’s hand weighed heavily on his shoulder.

The dentist’s hand was lighter but her firm fingers were dug hard into his shoulder, and kept sinking deeper and deeper, like roots.

“This is all because of those wretched lies... All because of them. But maybe I can lie in such a way that everything goes back to what it was? Just as though nothing had ever happened?”

“Well, at least the dam hasn’t burst! And my mother’s at home!” he suddenly yelled desperately without rhyme or reason.

"Your mother's at work," said a colleague of his mother's, suddenly appearing out of the blue, and he continued with a sigh, "You can't imagine what it's like there!.. The water's cascading down. So, your mother specially asked me to run and tell you she'll be staying there until tomorrow morning. Right. And I was walking along when I suddenly spotted you..."

"Liar! Liar! Liar!" exclaimed Greg's aunt gloatingly, giving Sasha a shake. "He's a liar, too!"

"But at least I've got no wild animals at home! And the mirror's not broken!" yelled Sasha, growing even more desperate.

Everyone there stared at him as though he were mad.

"Clown!" said a good-natured lad, who just happened to be passing and shook his head. "What a laugh!"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Coocooshkin!" said his teacher Anna Petrovna in a reproachful tone, appearing from behind the militiaman. "I've just been to your home and met your uncle. Goodness me, what a mess you keep your room in. But we'll talk about that another time. We've at least tidied things up a little, fed the animals and thrown away the broken pieces of mirror..."

Like a hunted animal, Sasha glanced round desperately at the people hemming him in and mesmerising him with their stares.

"Let me go!" he pleaded. "I'm in trouble! Let me go!"

"Trouble?" asked the militiaman. "What do you mean exactly?"

"He's not in trouble! Why listen to him? He's just up to something nasty again!" hissed Greg's aunt, clutching hold of Sasha with her other hand so that she now had total control over him.

"I must get to the encyclopedia! *The Encyclopedia of Magic!* Or else you'll all be done for! Let me go..." yelled Sasha in desperation, no longer fully understanding what he was shouting.

He suddenly saw Lena grab the dentist's hand with all her might, trying to unbend her iron fingers, one by one. He saw her eyes, her compressed lips and the gap between her two front teeth. Greg's aunt pushed her away with her elbow.

"I may get away from the militiaman but never from this one," Sasha suddenly thought. "She'll never give in."

He took a deep breath and yelled with all his might, even squatting slightly, "Fire! Your home is on fire!"

Everything stopped for a moment — people, traffic, the wind — and then all heads turned in the same direction.

"Good heavens!" shrieked Greg's aunt, appalled. "We're on fire! We're on fire!"

She slowly relaxed her grip and Sasha moved his shoulders and felt that he was free.

"We're on fire!" shouted someone else.

"Auntie!" shouted Greg.

Nobody had time for Sasha now, so he made a dash straight for Katya's house, running through the crowd, with heels, backs and elbows all flashing before his eyes.

He outpaced his teacher and his mother's colleague.

And now racing along ahead of him were Greg's aunt and the militiaman behind lightfooted Lena.

All of a sudden he stopped and someone flew straight at him, gasped and ran past. People were running past him on both sides, pushing and turning this way and that. Sasha was left all alone in the middle of the street. The sounds of stamping feet, frightened screams and howls faded. But he went on standing perfectly still and gazing in horror at Katya's house.

Black clouds of smoke were rising from Katya's pointed roof, and getting slowly bigger and bigger.

What had he gone and done now! He had quite forgotten that Greg's aunt lived in Katya's house! And now Katya's house was on fire. And that meant so was Katya's attic where *The Encyclopedia of Magic* was lying under some planks amidst the dust and jumble. What had he done?

Four red fire engines raced past Sasha, their sirens blaring.

He groaned and started running again.

## Chapter 11

### FIRE!

A thick crowd was standing all along the fence, the reds, greys, browns and stripes of their clothes, all blended together.

Sasha tried to squeeze between them but backs, shoulders, elbows all pushed and poked him and prevented him from getting through. Then, in utter despair, he got down on his hands and knees, dived between someone's legs and started crawling forward.

It was dark and shadowy in there, just like in a wood.

Voices swayed and droned overhead.

"It'll burn down!"

"Down to the ground!"

"Oh, come off it!"

"Look how slow those firemen are being! Just like sleepy flies!"

"Have a go yourself! Without water. Do you expect them to lick the flames out with their tongues!"

"It won't be so bad if just one burns down, as long as the flames don't spread!"

"But there's a wooden house behind!"

"And what about the sheds?"

"Yes, and what a wind! It's blowing like mad, damn it! It'll set our house on fire too!"

"What if the whole town burns down!"

Sasha started forcing his way more quickly through this forest of legs. He stepped on a woman's foot and something cold struck his cheek — a plucked chicken with closed eyes in a string bag.

He scrambled away and tried to crawl between two fat ladies but there turned out to be a little toddler standing there as well. The little boy smiled at him and stroked his back with his spade.

He no longer knew which direction to go in. There were legs in trousers and stockings everywhere he looked; a box with a cake in it; boots. Something stabbed him between the shoulder-blades — an umbrella! No, it was never going to end!

At his wits' end, he bashed his head against someone's briefcase and suddenly found himself crawling straight towards the fence. He pressed against it, seized hold of it and peered through a crack.

What chaos in Katya's yard.

There were at least ten fire engines in there, and lots of firemen running about with fire-extinguishers. Shiny ladders were being raised from the red vehicles.

The doors of the house kept opening and people kept running out, carrying all sorts of things in their arms.

An old woman came out clutching a cage with some kind of bird in it. Then came another old woman hugging a ficus plant.

"Maybe it's not too late?" Sasha thought anxiously. "It's all smoke but I can't see any fire. Maybe I'll manage to grab the book and run out again."

He started pushing his way through to the gate but a militiaman was standing and strictly barring the way with his long arm. Nearby Sasha caught sight of some more militiamen.

Then he remembered about the hole in the fence which he used far more often than the gate. It was unlikely that it was being guarded too.

He rushed back, elbowing his way through again.

"He won't let us watch in peace!" snapped a fat man with a briefcase. "Keeps crawling and running this way and that..."

Sasha ran along the fence to the hole where two planks were missing.

He poked his head through and spotted a pair of blue trousers. So, the hole was being guarded as well. The militiaman was ever so tall and hopelessly fierce-looking.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he whispered anxiously. "Please let me through. It's important. Please..."

Tears welled into Sasha's eyes and started pouring down his cheeks. And so he lay there perfectly still, staring up at the militiaman.

"Don't worry, don't worry, everything's going to be all right..." the militiaman said, even in a rather frightened tone and squatted down beside Sasha.

Sasha simply could not believe his eyes. He had never seen a militiaman squatting down before.

"So you live here, then?"

"Mmm..." Sasha heard someone else say. "Mmm..."

"Are you looking for your mum?" he asked sympathetically.

Sasha quickly nodded.

"Go and look for her then," said the militiaman, "Only do stop trembling so... Your mum's here somewhere and she's not going to disappear anywhere. Only you won't go near the house, will you?"

Then he took hold of Sasha's arm and helped him crawl through the hole. Sasha stood up, feeling giddy. He walked towards the house but kept his head turned sideways on purpose, and gradually quickened his pace. The militiaman stood still and watched him. Suddenly Sasha leapt between two fire engines and dashed towards the house.

"Hey, you!" someone yelled out from behind.

There was a horrible acrid smell of smoke in the entrance. People came running down the stairs past Sasha. Overhead he heard the patter of small boots on the stairs and saw Lena running towards him, hugging a large bald doll with an arm hanging from a thread and eyes that kept batting open and shut.

She ran past, so blinded by her tears that she did not even notice him. Sasha felt a sharp pang of pity and remorse.

"Lena... I didn't mean it to be like this..." his lips murmured senselessly. "You don't need that doll... I had no idea... I won't."

Mustering all the strength he had left, he tore up the stairs and suddenly stopped with one foot over a step, and then began slowly backing away in horror.

Amidst groans, roars and whines, resembling the sounds of a crazy, untuned orchestra, Uncle Simon came down the stairs with all his animals.

"How did he get here?" Sasha wondered. "Maybe he's been visiting someone? And taken all his animals along?"

The dense smoke swirled round Uncle Simon. All four monkeys were hugging his neck and it looked as though he had five heads. He was carrying a bear cub in his arms and with his foot jostling along the large she-bear which was waddling clumsily down the stairs.

And then Sasha was simply struck dumb.

After Uncle Simon came his mother, awkwardly clutching a brown cub which kept trying to wriggle out and kick with its short fat legs.

His mother's lips were trembling and she was deathly pale.

"Never mind, Masha," said Uncle Simon with difficulty, swaying under the monkeys' weight. "They'll put it out, it won't all burn down..."

The smoke was making his mother's eyes run. She was trying to wipe her wet cheek against her shoulder and did not notice Sasha. What's more, just then the huge bear and Uncle Simon's leg, pushing it along, got between her and Sasha.

"Why should our house burn down?" wondered Sasha. "It's not on fire... Oh no!" he turned and leaned his forehead against the cold dusty radiator. "I went and I lied to the militiaman just now that I lived here. And so now we really do live here. I only said 'Mmm'. But look what's happened! That means, I can't even nod my head. Now what's this? Things are getting worse all the time!..."

Some people were running towards him, shouting and coughing. Every now and then a hand, or a head or a fireman's round helmet would emerge from the smoke.

Everyone was running downstairs, and only Sasha was running up. And that's what scared him stiff.

And the smoke kept getting thicker, and stinging his eyes and burning his throat.

"Hey, Stepanov, there's nobody left?" someone shouted from down below. "Check all the flats!"

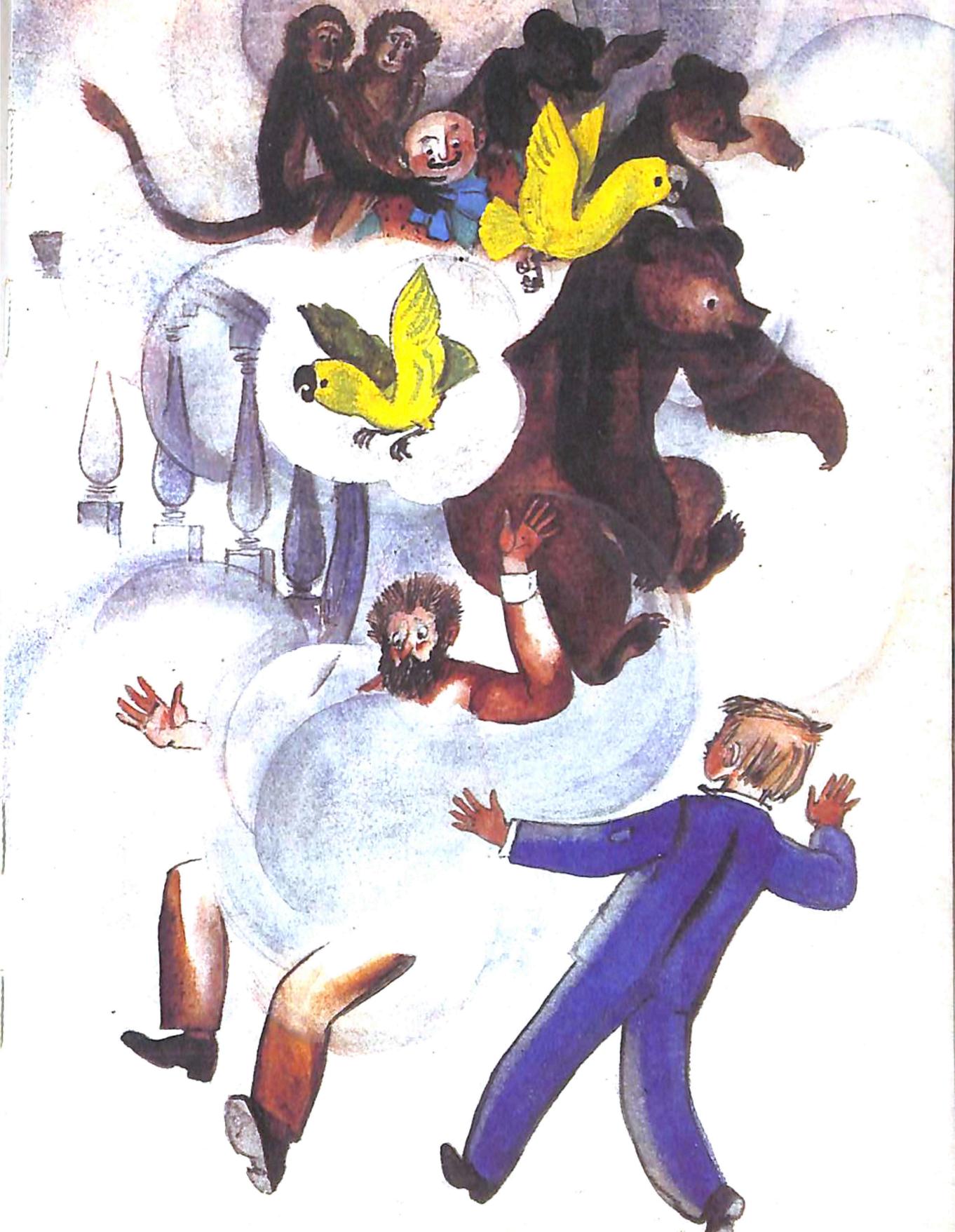
Sasha clapped his hand over his nose and mouth, screwed up his eyes, and seizing hold of the banister, pulled himself up, step by step, flapping away the dense hot smoke.

"Just a little bit more, a little bit more..." he kept telling himself, and in his mind's eye he saw Lena's face and her frightened, compassionate eyes.

The banister ended. With his eyes shut, he started groping blindly round for the attic door.

There it was! The plank was loose — so it must be the one! Burning hot, heavy smoke struck him in the face.

Something incredible was happening in the attic: something was crackling



and sighing right in the middle and even through his screwed-up eyelids he could sense that something fiery red was flickering.

“Books, you poor books!” Sasha called out helplessly, as though the books were puppies and could come running up to him themselves.

He squeezed through the door, no longer aware of anything except the unbearable fiery heat. A cascade of sparks blinded him. He started choking.

He had to get some air but there was none. He opened his eyes for a second and saw the trunk had caught fire. He could clearly see every crack lit up by the fire. A flame was droning inside it.

Sasha swallowed a mouthful of sparks and burning-hot smoke, and his head started spinning. He could not go on breathing or living like this any more...

Stretching out his arms, he fell flat on the burning-hot trunk...

## Chapter 12

### HELLO, “C”!

He opened his eyes and found himself sitting by the attic window with sharp fresh air blowing on his face.

To start off with, he could hardly understand where he was, and simply stared eagerly at the “cat’s eye” window, and its crooked frame, and the ray of sunlight alive with dancing coloured motes of dust.

He cautiously turned his head, still afraid he’d scare it all away — the attic, and the pile of old jumble, and the silence. He inclined his head slightly and looked askance. The trunk! He was sitting on the trunk!

There was something stirring weakly on his lap. He looked down and saw it was the breeze flicking through the pages of his open report book. He unclenched his tense fist with difficulty. A rubber jumped out of his palm and rolled off into the darkness.

He looked in his report book. A “C”! A “C”! A real live “C”! Standing there quite normally, just like nobody had rubbed it out.

He was absolutely thrilled. So, it was over! Nothing at all had ever happened! There'd been no fire, no accident, no misadventure with his dad's launch, nothing, nothing at all!

He jumped to his feet. Hurrah! And started dancing round the attic, kicking up dust and causing the ray of sunlight to grow murky.

How marvellous it was! So what if his dad was furious! So what if his dad thrashed him with his belt!.. He'd survive! He did not mind not going with his class on his dad's launch. Or not going with Katya...

He remembered Katya's light-coloured, screwed-up eyes and how she and Boris had laughed on the cliff top when they had seen his dad's launch lying on its side.

And then all of a sudden Sasha realised that even if none of this had actually happened, he would never forget the way they had laughed.

A heavy rain cloud began drifting towards the sun, plunging the attic into sudden darkness, and all the old jumble looked mysterious and queer again.

"But why did the magic end?" Sasha wondered. "I didn't really work out what it was all about..."

He no longer even wanted to touch the *Magic Encyclopedia*. Frowning, he remembered how it went:

*My witness is the starry Leo!  
The light of Sagittarius and Aquarius!  
Break the seal of magic!  
Only b ... no ... sp ... yo ... li...  
And b ... ge ... th ... be ... o ... you...  
Ma ... yo ... st ... a... ov ... aga...*

And all of a sudden the letters reappeared of their own accord, and somehow Sasha had no problem reading what was written there:

*My witness is the starry Leo!  
The light of Sagittarius and Aquarius!  
Break the seal of magic!  
Only by not sparing your life,*

*And by getting the better of yourself,  
May you start all over again!..*

Sasha cleared a way through the dusty jumble and pulled the trunk right to the back of the attic. Then he piled planks over it, leaned the broken bicycle against it, and stood a chair on top.

Nobody would find it now! This *Encyclopedia of Magic* was a dangerous thing. If it were to fall into the hands of someone like Greg, heaven alone knows what he might get up to.

"Let go! What have I done to you!" a high-pitched tearful voice cried out in the yard.

Sasha looked out of the window and, sure enough, it was Greg holding onto Lena! He had wrapped her pigtail round his fist and was slowly and cruelly drawing it towards him, and Lena was cringing with pain and trying to break free.

And then Sasha knew he was going to hit Greg. Yes, he was going to run out and hit him. As hard as he could. It did not matter what Greg did to him afterwards, he would fight to the last!

"What are you doing?" he yelled furiously, half-hanging out of the window. "Let go of her this minute! What's the matter with you? Right, I'll show you a thing or two!"

Greg gazed up in wonder and stood perfectly still.

And Lena also lifted her small pale face, and she looked so frightened and sad.

"What a loony!" said Greg, letting go of Lena's pigtail and walking towards the gate with a look on his face as though he simply couldn't be bothered to argue with Sasha because he had better things to do.

But Sasha could tell Greg was walking just a little faster than usual. Only a tiny bit faster. But he was still hurrying.

Sasha was a tough boy and knew only too well what this meant.

How terrifically proud he felt!

He clambered out onto the landing, put the plank back and ran downstairs.

He made up his mind there and then that when he had made up for

this bad mark and his parents had forgotten all about it, he would ask his mother if they could look after Lena.

It looked as though nobody had time for her at home. And even if they refused to give her up, it did not matter: just let anyone try and lay a finger on her! Yes, just let them try!



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